

Ovid's Bacchus: A Study in Gender Fluidity

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Abstract

In the history of literary and pictorial art, the depiction of Bacchus has always had a feminine streak. Ovid's portrayal of Bacchus in the *Metamorphoses* is no exception. However, Ovid's perception of the god born to a human mother and a divine father is polyvalent; it changes interestingly in *Ars Amatoria*. The *Metamorphoses* in general (and the third book in particular) has treated the figure of Bacchus in an intriguing fashion, pitted against the hypermasculinity of Pentheus that largely reflects the Augustan Roman ideals of gender and sexuality. The paper tries to assess the gender fluidity in the mythical construct of Bacchus by contextualising Ovid's depiction of the character in the *Metamorphoses* in terms of some Roman terms related to gender prevalent at the time when the text was written, and its social and aesthetic resonance.

Keywords: Ovid, Bacchus, gender, hypermasculinity, binary.

In her essay, "Michelangelo's Reflections on Bacchus," Luba Freedman identifies two important aspects of Michelangelo's depiction of Bacchus – his effort of conferring a sense of antiquity to the statue by deliberately damaging it (which in itself is quite intriguing), and the features of the God as they have come down to us from antiquity, of which Michelangelo highlights three:

Michelangelo accentuated three aspects in the figure: youth, nudity, and effeminacy Two points should be made about Bacchus's effeminacy.

Not only does the figure have a soft abdomen, but it also has slightly swelling breasts, both traditionally feminine features A similarly effeminate Bacchus, to be sure, had also been rendered by Michelangelo's immediate predecessors, such as Jacopo Belini, Marco Zoppo and Antonio Federight. (Freedman 125)

The question of Bacchus's effeminacy is thus a lingering issue in critical discourses; it is persistently developed in several art forms, both literary and visual for sure, giving us a sense of a critical imperative to probe into the gender construct as a part of normative social pattern. With Ovid in *Metamorphoses* the issue, if not of overwhelming importance, is at least a matter of serious discussion, and not so much for its relevance in the story as for his attempts at exacting Augustan ideals of gender and sexuality in his text.

Bacchus is described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 3 by Pentheus whose notion of masculinity/femininity is conspicuously Theban as he himself claims; Thebes was still young, and Cadmus's heroic feats to establish the state were fresh. The ideals of masculinity by then had found deep roots in the soil of Thebes – the kind of masculinity which underlined the heroic fortitude and achievements of its founder:

Remember him to whom you stand ally'd:
 The serpent for his well of waters dy'd.
 He fought the strong; do you his courage show,
 And gain a conquest o'er a feeble foe.

 Then might the Thebans perish with renown:
 But now a beardless victor sacks the town. (L 545-552)

Neither the 'beardless victor' nor the 'weak alarms of women's yells' should have swayed the Thebans at any rate; but Pentheus is scandalized to find that happening after all as the

Bacchantes have successfully popularised the God all over Thebes. Since Bacchus is born to Semele, an earthly Theban woman, and since his divinity is associated with the mystery that surrounds his birth from Jupiter's thigh after being miscarried as a foetus during Semele's death, all accusations that fly from Pentheus are centred on two issues primarily: his dubious status as a God, and his effeminate appearance as against Apollo's, the God the Thebans generally worshipped. The problem, therefore, lies in the very notion of difference: Bacchus is different from the rest of the divine beings for crossing boundaries in terms of gender markers and divine pedigree, though unwittingly. Given the prevalence of the motif of metamorphosis in Greek and Roman mythical stories and instances of homoeroticism in Greek society (Spartan youths were mostly acquainted with pederasty) an issue like gender-fluidity does not seem to be essentially problematic. What strikes as unique is the context of Augustan Roman masculinity and Ovid's own response to it, a part of that response showing in his depiction of Bacchus of course.

The third book of *Metamorphoses* itself has few stories which dramatize the gender stereotypes deconstructed to the best effect; for instance, Tiresias's story stretches the issue to its farthest, since Tiresias happens to live his life both as a man and as a woman. Even though the story of Tiresias deals with the question of gender fluidity in unequivocal terms in his switching from one gender identity to another, the element of ambiguity regarding one's gender identity is not of prime significance here. On the other hand, the story of Narcissus celebrates certain liminality in the discourse of gender and sexuality, otherwise absent in Tiresias's story. Narcissus is fated to die the moment his gaze turns towards his own self – the question of male gaze discovering in the mirror such an image that becomes an object of his own erotic attraction is problematized not merely for the non-normative sexuality it evokes, but also for the thwarted development of the ego it refers to. Here is one man who has developed a fatal, sexual craving for his own self, but has failed to realize that it has

become an eponymous symbol for his inability to love others throughout his life, the goddess Echo included! Moreover, Narcissus's phenomenal beauty is described as attractive not in the typical masculine or feminine ways, but in its approximation of some divine features:

The well-turn'd neck, and shoulders he descries,
The spacious forehead, and the sparkling eyes;
The hands that Bacchus might not scorn to show,
And hair that round Apollo's head might flow; . . . (L 419-422)

By combining the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the true sense of the term, Narcissus embodies in himself an ideal of beauty. The story of Diana and Actaeon also lays bare an intriguing game of power: the male gaze of Actaeon is countered and punished by Diana spying the inadvertent act of unfortunate Actaeon. In a way, therefore, the *raison d'être* of the third book of Ovid's text may be said to be a typical analysis of deviations from binaristic gender construct, in the context of which Bacchus emerges as a credible and enduring figure standing between the human and the divine, assimilating some feminine qualities in his biological maleness.

Pentheus, historically/mythically a Theban, however, behaves in the manner of a true Roman individual when it comes to his confrontation with Bacchus. Anderson opines, "Pentheus speaks for native Roman values of manliness and martial preparedness against the alien vice of effeminacy and religious fakery that he attributes to Bacchus and his corrupt followers" (389). Since Bacchus's overwhelming impact was felt in the Middle East and even India in the growth of vineyards, Bacchus's Asiatic connection was one of the reasons behind Pentheus's deep-seated suspicion – to him it was likely to have been imported and not indigenous to the Theban soil. On the other hand, Roman masculinity in Augustus's time is quite an overwhelming concern. Octavius Caesar consolidated the Roman military power to project Rome as a country of masculine men. His own status as the leader of men conforms to

the propagated idea of masculinity. Katie Thompson in her dissertation titled *Augustus and the Architecture of Masculinity* reveals how the idea of Roman masculinity in the late Republic and afterwards was enmeshed intricately with the discourses on penetration of three types – sexual, physical (wounds in battle) and visual (19-20). Referring to Kuefler's *The Manly Eunuch*, she lays bare the nuances of the words like *vir* and *mollitia*; the former is used for manly, courageous and powerful men and the latter for the effeminate men. Effeminacy was detected in one's behaviour as being womanly soft, his talking with a lisp, his walking and also, quite significantly, in one's lack of power (20). This was further associated with the 'humiliating' fact of one's being on the receiving end of sexual and visual penetration: "What all these terms together illustrate is sexual relationships in Roman culture were made up of a man, *vir*, and an other, which could be a woman or man of different social status" (Thompson 21).

The Spartan custom of pederasty was lingering in Augustan Rome with some significant modifications as an adolescent boy was often considered to be a substitute for a woman keeping in view his position in a sexual relationship with an older man; however, the entire thing was treated in a pejorative fashion for it was shameful for a young man socially belonging to a higher class to have feminine experiences. He was to qualify as an 'impenetrable penetrator' to be precise. Moreover, Ovid's handling of the theme of love in *Ars Amatoria* and *Amores* is largely a manifestation of the normative gender roles and construct that would assert its presence in every prescription that Ovid gives to the lovers. Ovid's reference to Bacchus in connection with *Ars Amatoria* is intriguingly different though – different from what we see in the *Metamorphoses*. Since Bacchus falls for Ariadne, the Cretan girl and surprises her by his offer of love from among the inebriated entourage of Maenads and Satyrs, after Theseus has deceived her, he fits into the role of a lover wooing his beloved with a perfect blend of softness and beautiful gift of the sky, but not with the

typical masculine aggression. Nevertheless, Ovid's suggestions to lovers encompass quite an array of activities which provide a propitious berth for behaviours unlikely to be mistaken for rapacious and aggressive male gestures; here, love happens to be the prime concern, and therefore, Bacchus unequivocally qualifies as a male lover:

Ah, Bacchus calls to his poet: he helps lovers too,
and supports the fire with which he is inflamed.

.....

She shook, like a slender stalk of wheat stirred by the wind,
and trembled like a light reed in a marshy pool.

To whom the god said: 'See, I come, more faithful in love:
have no fear: Cretan, you'll be bride to Bacchus.

Take the heavens for dowry: be seen as heavenly stars:
and guide the anxious sailor often to your Cretan Crown.'

He spoke, and leapt from the chariot, lest she feared
his tigers: the sand yielded under his feet:

clasped in his arms (she had no power to struggle),

he carried her away: . . . (*Ars Amatoria*, Book -I, Part 15)

In Bacchus's case the transformation of the effeminate God into a masculine lover is highly intriguing: "A man, to be a man, must be *durus* (hard), but love (for which he needs to be *durus*) will make him *mollis* (soft)" (Sharrock 97). Theseus's betrayal of Araidne is followed by Bacchus's 'manly' gesture of rescuing her from morbidity and offering of love and promising immortality through transformation into a constellation of stars.

Unlike Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, the *Metamorphoses* offers a different perspective to gender roles and gender fluidity; the mythical narrative has a completely different resonance. *Ars Amatoria* deploys mythical instances for elucidation and substantiation, but the latter

thrives entirely on myth. As a consequence, the distancing between reality and mythological ‘fabula’ can conveniently be projected as an ‘apologia’ in the sense that Bacchus’s effeminacy then remains restricted within a mythical construct, and Ovid himself is exempted from a commitment that could create a critical impasse regarding the projection of the divine figure. There is yet another dimension to the way Bacchus is depicted in the third book of the *Metamorphoses* – it is through the narration of Bacchus’s devotee, Acoetes. When Pentheus sends his men for capturing Bacchus, they find Acoetes, whose worshipful adoration for the God seems to have originated from his experience of Bacchus’s divinity. However, Acoetes’s description provides a critical parameter for approaching the equation between power and gender construct in favour of Bacchus. The men on board Acoetes’s ship had a vile intention of waylaying the young boy, beautiful and lithe and apparently incapable of protecting himself and sell him somewhere; their behaviour betrays a kind of rapaciousness. Moreover, Bacchus *appeared* vulnerable. He convinced the rowdy men with his speech projecting his helplessness:

The beauteous youth now found himself betray’d,
 And from the deck the rising waves survey’d,
 And seem’d to weep, and as he wept he said:

. . . .

Will such a multitude of men employ
 Their strength against a defenceless boy? (L 652-658)

Just as *vir* and *mollitia* created a disjuncture, a normative and binaristic way of looking at the masculine and the feminine, there was yet another set of contrasts – between *vir* on the one hand and *pueri*, *adulescents* and *homines*, on the other, the latter set of words indicating male youth. Thompson adds, referring to Jonathan Walter’s *Invading the Roman Body* that the term *puer* or ‘boy’ was often used to denote the penetrated female (21). Bacchus’s self-

portrayal in front of the sailors as a ‘defenceless boy’, therefore, is highly nuanced. As much as the Spartans, the Romans celebrated courage as an essential aspect of masculinity. In the context of a desired quality of a Spartan or a Roman man, Bacchus’s own submission would look scandalously weak and effeminate. However, the subversion of the gender role is here deliberate and ironical. Bacchus increases their confusion with his projected image of defencelessness; soon his vengeance is unleashed on them and all the crew members barring Acoetes are metamorphosed into dolphins. The story is so incredible that Pentheus does not believe any of it. Nevertheless, his own fate is sealed, as Tiresias predicted and as Pentheus gets killed by the Bacchantes including his own mother and aunts. Even in the episode of Pentheus’s death, the subtextual reference is that of the women overpowering and even killing the man exuding a kind of masculine qualities which are by and large toxic. Pentheus’s hypermasculinity has certainly backfired, to be precise. But, more than the gender identity, it is his divinity that raises Bacchus to a position of power that Pentheus fails to measure or challenge successfully.

Alison Sharrock while discussing ‘Gender and Sexuality’ in Ovid writes, “Masculinity is predicated not only on sexual performance but also on autarky If the very thing that makes a man (sexual power) also unmakes him (by undermining his autarky), then gendered categories are never going to be easy and stable” (96). She begins her discourse with a reference to the intriguing story of Iphis (*Metamorphoses*, Book-XI); a story that may be considered as proving a counter to the normative gender construct in which the girl is reared and nurtured as a boy (reminding us, by a process of cultural transposition of the princess of Manipur, Chitrangada). However, Iphis’s story takes another disturbing turn when she gets a woman as her bride – a problem that is solved by the intervention of Isis. Nevertheless, the stories of sexual or gender metamorphosis are mostly highlighted in the third book of the text, although the motif of gender fluidity is an integral part of the text’s

major thrust. Bacchus's effeminacy is not a cultural acquisition, but a mythical given and is consequent upon a Greek and Roman perception of masculinity, more precisely, upon the Roman variety. It is, therefore, in the gender fluidity we associate with Bacchus, in Ovid or in Michelangelo that the mythical and the historical blend in perfect harmony. The Roman Republic's denunciation of Bacchanalia is reflected in Pentheus's voice; but it is in the artistic perception of Bacchus's effeminacy across culture, across time and space that history is subtly overtaken by myth.

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